



University of Iowa

---

International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work

---

Fall 10-1-2007

## Writing Sample

Nirwan Dewanto

Includes "FROM THE STATION," "TIGER," "SERPENT," "SQUID," "Haunted by the history of literature," and "Against Purity: Reflections of an Indonesian Writer."

---

### Rights

Copyright © 2007 Nirwan Dewanto

### Recommended Citation

Dewanto, Nirwan, "Writing Sample" (2007). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 194.

[https://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp\\_archive/194](https://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp_archive/194)

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#). For more information please contact: [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

Nirwan DEWANTO

Poetry, an essay and a chapter fragment

## FROM THE STATION

For many years, I just passed through on the night train. She sat there peacefully, somewhere between my birthplace to the east and the city in the west where I studied geology. When the train stopped for a moment at the station in the middle of the night, she seemed to stir, as though preparing herself for my arrival at some point in the future. She remained hidden, because she had more history than any other city in the world. And I let myself look out at her precisely so that I could forget her. Or maybe, so that I could take her shadow away in my suitcase.

I took this suitcase with me as I traveled around the world: I believed that it contained my hometown. But every time I opened the suitcase in a white or colored city abroad, what fluttered out were the shadows of the iron pillars and the giant clock at the train station; of the faded white walls of the fortress that believes itself to be young forever; of the pool with its ornate Portuguese gate where the sultans played with their consorts; of the silver rainbow that shone shortly before the Ninth Sultan passed away; of the nine graceful dancers dressed in dark brown moving slowly like the South Sea; of the pair of grand old banyan trees in the square that we passed through without our knowing whether they were asleep or awake; of the pedicab drivers who stop sweating as they pass the bird market; of the soldiers in their striped costumes who have never set eyes on an enemy...

Now, she is a map as vast as my own palm: I never just passed through her, because in fact my train only followed the trail of my sweat and blood. Look, look at the cities along our island in the night, like fireflies drawing closer to her, because she appears as a heart flowing with dazzling dark blood. Now, I live in another city which, they say, is the mother of all the cities of my country, a city that threatens to stretch across the entire planet, a city filled with too many faces in the harsh light of the afternoon, each of which is about to reach out and grab me, as though I were a marble Brancusi egg. But on the map saturated with these fireflies, no one can tell which is the egg and which is the heart. Believe me, I make her heart throb and she disperses me, so that you might imagine we're twins:

She is a grand andesite statue from the Revolutionary period; I wait patiently to clean the dust and moss from her face. She is Semar and his sons, goading the nobles at court; I am the painter who inscribes the scene onto a glass panel using the bright, vulgar colors of Flying Horse brand paint. She is the gong who sounds shyly in the Grand Mosque; I am the poet who tries to capture that echoes in my clumsy quatrain. I am the marble Brancusi egg that she sculpted into a newborn baby in light, hard wood. I am the whip that is tired of beating the horse; she raises me up and morphs me into a fan that cools the face of a sculptor. I am the mountain of rice and fruit that is taken out to the square on the Prophet's birthday; leading the procession, she understands the hidden secrets of Mount Merapi. I am the ballad of the Andalusian Gypsy people; she is the children's songs which robs me of my rhyme and rhythm.

Sometimes we are foes because she tames my friends too calmly. Like me, they have left their home towns behind. Unlike me, they think they own her and her history. When they steal my train, I know that the station, whose name is Tugu, continues to follow me. When they cover my map with their new homes and studios, I know that I still have the trail of my blood on the planted fence, the bicycle handlebar, or the plain cloth at Langenastran. Sometimes I wear their shoes and clothes so that she recognizes me no longer. At the flea market, or in front of the Central Post Office, or in the edge of the Sitiinggil hall, over and over again I say goodbye to my friends, those who are wearing my face, but, alas, they shout out to me, welcome, welcome, o, ye, our mother's tongue, the tongue wounded by names...

For years and years, I learned how to say her name so that I would no longer have to praise her. She doesn't like to compare herself with any other city on earth. From the station, I learnt to forget my own face. I inscribed a map in my own palm where I plotted her many faces and told tales I will never completely comprehend. She let my friends, and probably my enemies as well, possess her so that I would not be bound to her. One morning, one of her limbs was torn apart by a quake. I returned to my study of geology to convince myself that her future was longer than her past. And she described the line of killers that floated gently over Merapi's peak as dirty old sheep, so I will always be suspicious of all faces and all names.

(2006)

*Translated from the Indonesian by Irfan Kortschak  
with the author*

\*

**TIGER**

From the other side of darkness  
patiently you wait for me.  
Listen to me  
I must utter the incantations of a thousand holy books  
before I take you on  
so that I can take hold of clarity  
enough cleanse your scorched and burning body  
and vacancy enough  
to bargain with the echo of your roar.  
Page by page  
each of my claws will be sharpened  
by the bloody footsteps of our forebearers.  
On the cover of each volume  
I will engrave the image of your face  
savage as the race of blind lovers.  
Then when my space has grown more open  
you will inch closer  
No, you will not be brave enough to touch me  
you are merely restless passion  
at the moment I open my shirt  
though your fangs glisten and sparkle  
you haven't the guts to wrestle with me.  
Look closely at this trembling body  
this body that has not yet completed its incantations  
this body thirsty for all the pathways of the world.  
Your steps are as light as the tick of a clock  
so that now your chasms encircle my peaks.  
My cough is high-pitched, like the typhoon of night  
may it always bring your fear.  
No, I feel that it is always I who approach you  
offering myself as bait  
because I fear to make you my prey.  
Believe me when I say that only you know  
whether I am male or female  
whether I lust for you, or seek revenge.  
When your blood drips on my body  
I will know I have wounded you, torn you to shreds.  
And in an expanse of mirror  
I will no longer be able to see your countenance  
for at that moment my lust will be perfect.  
Then listen as my steps fade into the distance  
light as the tick of a clock.  
Then listen to the typhoon of night  
as I gaze at you from a corner hidden in the distance  
as you sharpen your claws

as you make your body virgin once again  
as my mother becomes yours  
as you steal light from my body  
as I steal darkness from your holy books.

\*

## SERPENT

I let them drink from the still waters of my depths  
so that they will be more youthful, and more thirsty.  
I block them both at the entryway  
each time they make a move to leave this place  
for I know that the Countenance, whose place is there so very far away  
will turn them into nothing more than a standard mother and father.  
They are the most beautiful creatures in this Garden:  
more slippery than the tiger pierced with light  
more swift than turtledoves the color of blood  
more poisonous even than me.  
Because I have no face of my own I follow their very movement  
and spread over the entire Garden, from corner to corner  
so that they will not get separated, or even defeated  
by a treasure that appears from time to time  
from behind the barrier: perhaps it is the Dead Sea  
whose saltiness is not to be found in my source  
or Karbala, where clusters of rock and earth  
shine more splendidly when sprinkled with blood.  
I suckle the breasts of the female so that  
I will truly not compete with the male.  
I swallow the sperm of the male so that  
I will truly have no envy for the female.  
I am even more impartial, leading both  
to the tree of darkness, yea even unto the tree of light:  
Choose for yourselves which fruit will be most fruitful:  
when your tongue is wounded, so shall you know language  
and when you are satiated, perhaps you will be destroyed.  
Such was my advice, but they did not hear  
anything but an indistinct hissing  
so that in the end they merely drooped  
at the edge of the river. Forgive me:  
I will drench them with water, even if they  
merely thirst, I will set them loose  
so that I complete the circle.  
Know this: they will awaken in the midst

of rows of mustard and wheat, then will light the fire  
that will entice the Countenance to come to us.  
'Truly, allow me to go on without a visage  
for I am only a kind of river  
though my current is heard  
only as the hiss of a forked tongue.  
Believe me, I have nursed  
those twins, cleansing them from the clay  
and dregs of the creation of the earth and sky.  
'They are yours now — behold oh Countenance of Fire  
but don't force me to confess  
as if to conceal in my depths  
a single turn of the Way that leads to you.

\*

## SQUID

—after Hiroshi Sekine

Like a handkerchief  
with one corner torn away  
where it collided with the reef  
a handkerchief now transparent  
saturated with tears  
that seeks eyes of truth  
eyes that never ask  
where their skeleton has gone  
where the redness of their flesh.  
In truth eyes like that  
are the eyes of a master diver  
who also knows that the fringes  
of that wounded corner  
are only ten in number  
like her own fingers  
fingers that have never been sharpened  
by the thorns of the stars or the hair of the moon.  
I think that those two will meet  
on the broad expanse of algae  
where the diver's fingers bleed  
and all those enemies with knife-sharp teeth  
hunt them even to the base of a chasm.  
I think that those two are competing  
to reach the final line of a conclusion  
but no, they are touching each other

even threading themselves together with no sense of shame  
so that those twenty fingers  
those twenty torn strips of the fringes  
grow as wide as a wave  
so that the body of the diver  
becomes as clear as the morning air  
and our little handkerchief no longer  
swims, but takes flight  
flying high in search of eyes  
eyes glistening with tears  
because they have no power to distinguish night  
from black ink as wide as the sea  
that drags the diver away from death.  
I think now it is only a squid  
that has taken form as a handkerchief  
for it is always thirsty  
for your eyes, for your tears.

\*

### **Haunted by the history of literature**

Our thoughts today are haunted by the history of literature. Conventional historians believe that history has a linear movement: we move from a single, initial origin to a single, glorious destination. History is also a totalization, cutting off various worldviews that are not yet complete. It is this way that literature in Indonesia(n) emerged as a reaction to—as the child of?—the language politics of the colonial Dutch government. The history of our literature is the history of the consolidation of the Indonesian language; it forms part of the history of Indonesian nationalism.

Many people believe that there truly is a history of Indonesian literature, if only because the use of Malay—I mean, Indonesian—has reached an astonishing level. Also because this language has succeeded in depicting multiple images of Indonesia achieved through strife and struggle. This language, that before was just a *lingua franca*, nevertheless proved capable of giving birth to reformers, blasphemers, and revolutionaries. And indeed, the reformers and revolutionaries in turn produced a beautifying, stabilizing, affirmative level of nationalism. One friend says that we do have a history of literature, but no history of science.

The history of our literature is one of continuous internal affirmation. This affirmation has been of great use, at least since the Cultural Polemics (1934-1939), more in repeated efforts to create a national identity than in attempts to form an intimate relationship with the world's literature. And how sad that we were colonized by the Netherlands—which only left traces of romanticism, and even those arrived late—until contact with Europe came, much

delayed. So Europe—whether seen in a positive or a negative manner—has always been experienced far too romantically. The West, or Europe, has always been placed *outside*, and never *within* the depths of Indonesian literature. At the same time, we have witnessed the struggle, the wars of position over who is more Indonesia(n).

At some point, this affirmation reached its climax. The dogmatic might say that this is the will of history. It was because of this will of history that a literary Pope was able to raise such a large following. It was because of this will of history that people like Dami N. Toda have felt it necessary to lock down what they call an “aesthetic conception of Indonesian poetry” into a single viewpoint with “one eye” being Chairil Anwar and “the other eye” Sutardji Calzoum Bachri. But I don’t believe in the will of history. I believe that our thoughts are haunted by the history of literature and not by its future.

Of course, it has to be admitted that the history of Indonesian literature came about because of political accidents, and not as the result of a straightforward cultural politics. (It is not that we are disappointed about this fact; on the contrary, perhaps just the opposite?) Our modern literature apparently failed—or refused?—to unite itself with the entire project of social modernization. To be sure, this was not the fault of the literary community; all kinds of pushing and pulling, both from inside and outside the field of literature, too quickly transformed literature into an autonomous discipline with the appearance of stability—as if it were at the antipodes of daily mediocrities. Today we are witness to a literature beleaguered by soaring pragmatism on the one side, and the proliferating mass media on the other. The first, as if inspired by nationalism of another form, sells progress and prosperity by means of an officialized, desiccated language, yet not infrequently using pleasant images to persuade. Bit by bit, it defeats and restricts the pockets of what should be artistic appreciation and potential. (With this fact it is true that the formation of a new “bourgeoisie” in our large cities is not by itself stimulating the development of modern art). The second, the expansion of the mass media, requires a certain variety of styles, because the market cannot have just one taste. The result is language experiments—just as a facet of the competition in packaging—in newspaper and magazine offices, and in specific stages writing appears that reaches the level of literature. As a consequence, Literature is not so important anymore, because “literature” is everywhere.

---

Now let us view all this from a distance. The centers of world culture, so it was once believed, today are experiencing disintegration. In the past they constructed orientalism—because with that ideology they could make their fortune: in the past, they were the masters and we the slaves. Now, long after independence, orientalism is not dead but it has changed its form: no more white-skinned masters and slaves of color. It is not impossible for nationalism to incorporate orientalism, because that is supported by a slave becoming master. And Europe (or whatever is labeled “the West”) has become chronically ill with feelings of having wronged, because they realized that the wrongs were based on their own philosophical and scientific system, which has supported/opposed their complete supremacy from the Renaissance to today’s information age.

The discourse that today spreads throughout the world, with multiple forms and variations, calls into question domination in the name of knowledge. (Is it not the victory of



science and technology, on the foundation of which the children of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, on their own, gave birth to Eurocentrism?) Thus, great opportunities were opened for many groups of minorities and the marginalized to push themselves forward and confront themselves. Of course, a great danger of this condition is the revival of ethnocentrism and every species of ancient connection that has been disparaged. But it is fitting, in the midst of a global migratory flow of people, things, and sings as awe-inspiring as it is today, that a positive result would be *transculturalism*: a person can be raise in one cultural orbit, achieve success however that may be possible, enter different cultural orbits, and absorb creative powers from all of them.

Multiculturalism, which has in fact occured—and continues to occur—in every field, is particularly clear if we look closely at the mature world literature. That which can now be called world literature is actually the literature of the formerly colonized countries. Works by Third World novelists—primarily those formerly colonized by the English, Spanish, and French—truly demolish the canon that for so long has been believed in by academic, editorial, and critical circles, not to mention readers.

One person among them, Indian novelist Vikram Seth, observes that today the English language has been appropriated by people whose native language is not English. It is true, English (language) literature today is enlivened by the creative mischief of writers of color, the (formerly) colonized. This has also occurred with Spanish and French (language) literature. The Moroccan novelist Tahar Ben Jelloun jokingly said that he writes in French because he does not want to compete with his father or Allah, both of whom always used Arabic.

By means of the language of their (former) colonizers, they have pierced to the heart the discourse that emanated from Europe. Because before, of course, by means of those languages, colonialism promulgated assertions of the height of its own culture and the backwardness of the colonized one. But now, heavy with local content, these novelists of color have dismantled both Europe as well as their native lands, and indeed they no longer find a “center from which to view the world”. This path has been easier whenever they have been enriched by the European literary canon (by means of formal education) as well as the riches of their local languages and traditions. Because of this their reality always has multicultural characteristics.

In this way, postnational literature has also become a genre that carries historiography and anthropology. It turns again and again to folktales, imitating them, because folktales are the oldest form of knowledge, from when humanity was not yet (satisfied with being) separated from nature. In addition, it has adapted all forms of expression, such as film and advertising, because with these it can make obsolete the pretensions of “high art and literature”—that legacy of the traditional *liberal arts* education.

These tendencies do not stand alone, of course. Today the countries of the North are in the midst of a fierce struggle to tear down their eurocentrism. This is not a new style of romanticism, but rather something objective: they are becoming aware of the paralysis of their epistemology and because of that they have to acknowledge new creative forces that until now have been trivialized and suppressed. The breadth of what has been termed *cultural studies*, that is, that “discipline” which overcomes the awkwardness’s of the disciplines,

erodes orientalism, tries to see culture outside the framework of center-and-periphery, and attempts to problematize the hierarchy of worldviews.

Various national-language literatures, such as Turkish and Chinese literature, are finally drawing profit from this shift the map of world literature. These literatures have in fact followed the rise and fall of the tides determined by those changes. A national language truly can act as sponge to absorb directly both local and global trends; the fate of Indonesian literature will surely be likewise.

But, apparently, not yet. Or perhaps not at all? One reason, I think, is that we are haunted by the history of Indonesian literature, that is, a history that is overloaded with nationalism. When this talk is over we will doubtless hear from critics who will say that what is needed is a native Indonesian theory of literature: they will be afraid of using various up-to-date theories from the West. We will then be disturbed by cries about the necessity to return to traditional roots. About the stability of our literary system. About the threat to the identity of Indonesian literature. I believe that people who are overly enthusiastic for this proposition are not engaged in a dialog with the latest flare-ups in world literature, nor with disciplines outside their own field. They persist in romanticizing the West, and, because of that, regard the outside world as a threat. Certainly, a national self-pride that is too great could be killed.

I am not a person who glorifies literature. Yet, if a few among us (yes, only a few) choose literature, the problem is not just innovation and creative freedom—much less any connection with personal freedom. It is truly ironic that innovation and creative freedom have become myths and fetters of such strength within the history of our literature. So forget about the history of Indonesian literature! Our base today is the entire world. We are bringing about a mental migration on a large scale. This is not a struggle, but rather a game. Yes, think of Amir Hamzah, who played games with the inner and outer worlds, with the Malay language and the entire world; he is even more alive today. But Takdir Alisjahbana, who struggle with a past, “pre-Indonesia” age, belongs only to a specified time.

The flames of world literature must not be kept on the outside, but within ourselves. I am convinced that if this takes place, the many local treasures, our traditions, will live within new forms, penetrating to the interior of the words we disgorge.

This opportunity is truly enormous. Even greater, perhaps, for those whose mother tongue is Malay. One Indonesian poet—a Javanese—once said to me that for him, writing poetry was a battle with the Indonesian language, because his mother tongue was Javanese. Malay people don’t have to fight, but can play with Indonesian. It is within that play, I believe, that the Indonesian language, Indonesian literature, can shed all of its pretensions. Then, as in a carnival, it will be multicolored, alive, aquiver. Then, like a sponge, it will absorb the entire world.

*Translated from the Indonesian by Richard C. Miller*

## **Against Purity: Reflections of an Indonesian Writer**

The thoughts below were written by an Indonesian writer, namely myself. But, calling myself an "Indonesian writer" does not mean that I represent Indonesia. My experience reflects not just my artistic aspirations but also the environment that brings my art to life. Indonesia is not a large abstract unit except that it is continually formulated through power and bureaucracy. Indonesia, or the Indonesian experience to be specific, is something concrete when reflected in daily life, particularly in the experiences of its citizens in their various fields. There is actually no original, pure, formal, static or eternal Indonesia. An Indonesian person is a human being first before being an Indonesian. Consequently, I am pulled between being a human and being an Indonesian, between a universal and a local source of strength. The result of this contest all by itself has already led to a complex reality, i.e., pluralism. But pluralism does not show up out of the blue. Sometimes it is only a hope, sometimes a risky reality. My experience suggests that complexity is not a gift, but an oftentimes painful struggle.

1

Since our country began implementing open door politics (from about 1968), more and more of us have become migrants or urbanites. We leave our childhood homes in droves, our limited first environment, and head for a more modern and more receptive space, to get a better education, to find a good job, to make broader contact with the outside world and so on. I am no exception. For my education and my health, I left Banyuwangi and Jember (two small towns in East Java) for Bandung (the provincial capital of West Java), and finally Jakarta. Where are the roots of my culture? What are my traditions? It is often true that any understanding of tradition and culture follows a stereotypical pattern, is rarely looked at in any thorough way, and is usually not discussed productively. All of us as people, wherever we are in the world, often do not recognize that we live within a certain tradition.

I want to give tradition a creative and productive meaning here. For me, tradition is never just a set of rules that I follow and use at the behest of my own society. Tradition is not just a piece of past glory nurtured for the dignity and well-being of a particular society. In a world which is already so specialized, tradition can also be a paradigm, a discipline and a medium for each cultural actor - each person - to join in strengthening modernity. However, on the other hand, in the desire to move forward, a tradition can control our path in life, without our knowing it. An intellectual can be great if he or she is brought to life by scientific traditions. A painter may become brilliant if there is a tradition of modern art to support this work. Tradition then, does not have to pass down through primordial ties. In daily life, nonetheless, we often hear the derisive comment, "it's really traditional." The word "traditional" here is pejorative, being connected with something from a time and place that is not "modern." If there is a festival of traditional art, it may have the intention of "preserving" art which is not modern, and which is almost extinct. If a boss in a private company says, "my workers are rather traditional," he is probably implying that they are too relaxed, not creative, do not work based on the clock and cannot adjust to machines or computers.

Of course, tradition can still be seen as a refreshing and inspiring treasure trove from the past. This kind of tradition actually does not have any direct productive value, probably because no one - at least up to my generation - wishes to be without roots or history. Going home at the end of Ramadhan (Islamic fasting month), no matter how expensive or difficult, is still a tradition with the Javanese. The handicrafts or ethnic art found in executive boardrooms or international hotels are not just for show but also act as a means of underlining identity. The study of history in schools can be seen as part of the effort to uphold the tradition of Indonesian nationalism.

[...]

3

If I think about the art world amidst the tumult of daily life, a rather ingrained romantic image starts to appear, of artists as the seekers and discoverers of truth. This image is not just what the artists personally believe (as it provides them with the desire to create) but is also emphasized by the critics, art academies, art centers, museums and art markets of the modern era. Modern art, says a philosopher, brings forgotten truths to life. In the history of Europe, the emergence of modern art was accompanied by the emergence of a bourgeoisie, the group fighting for a market economy, industrialization and democratic representation. Modern art aided them by putting the experience of individual freedom into practice. Then, the bourgeois influence expanded and put down firm roots, becoming capitalism, and spreading throughout the globe.

The capitalism rampant in Indonesia during the past two decades has definitely not been the capitalism seen in the history and ethos of the bourgeoisie. But, this does not mean that it has no role in developing art. The painting boom seen in Indonesia's big cities about five to six years ago, and again today, is but one example. At that time, the (new) rich flocked about buying paintings, particularly decorative ones. These people have certainly profited from the growth of Indonesia's economy but they are not a bourgeois class in the European sense. Buying paintings does not imply any thorough support for the existence of art over the long term.

When looked at more closely, the painting boom is not intimately connected with the "success" of domestic capitalism. (Capitalism only has meaning if put on the world stage.) The internationalization of the economy which has increased in pace in the last ten years has been underway since 1968. The business world grew and designs were needed on a grand scale. A design boom encouraged the internationalization of style and taste. The growth of interior design (in offices, hotels and private homes) created a need for paintings. This trend, infected also by the tendency to collect paintings as investments, found in the capitalist countries as well, then spurred on the painting boom.

The Indonesian art market is probably not much different from the market for exclusive goods. It is seasonal. This market in Europe and the United States can trigger the growth and institutionalization of a movement because the market is joined in with the network of art criticism (inherited from the bourgeoisie). In Indonesia, it is sufficient to say that the art market has created some significant fears among our artists. On the one hand, it is thought

to have contaminated art's "purity." On the other hand, it is celebrated for undermining the established elitism nurtured by our art history. In other words, the strength of the market in its broadest sense has inspired heterogeneity.

This heterogeneity has also been decisively championed by Indonesian art critics and thinkers who attack the universal criteria and hierarchy that overwhelm Indonesian art. This type of criteria is in fact only derived from the history of Indonesia's modernist intellectuals and is not supported by any particular social class (such as the bourgeoisie in Europe) or by the cultural politics of the state. As a result, the work of these critics is more a form of deconstruction of our art history, haunted as it is by European modernism.

If there is an agreement in the push for heterogeneity, it does not mean that the critics are in alliance with the marketplace. They are merely putting art back as a symptom of society. It is through them that we are made aware that the romantic position of the artist is a myth and that economic and political change exert a great (albeit hidden) influence on the creation of art. At the very least, their ideas can create a more healthy acceptance of international upheavals, upheavals which turn out to be inseparable from the late capitalism.

The late, global capitalism is a capitalism which has changed its nature because of what it has learned from its detractors and critics. This capitalism has shifted at its fundamental points from manufacturing to the provision of service and information. It has cleverly accommodated labor union demands, environmental sustainability and the creative and critical power of the consumer for its long-term needs. It has also integrated many elements of socialism within itself even while staying rooted in the principles of decentralization and deregulation, necessary because a centralized system is not efficient in facing rapid change. This capitalism does not offer a uniformity of style or of cultural images because the market and the labor force have been so thoroughly diversified. In this latest era of global capitalism, the emergence of (the so called) postmodernism is so inevitable.

Postmodernism is not anti-modernism or the end of modernism. Postmodernism breaks down the modernist pathology which believes too much in rational thought and linear social historical development. It points out that the systems of knowledge spread around the globe (once considered objective, neutral and universal) are actually cloaked in power. Postmodernism attacks Eurocentrism or, in general terms, the leadership of the West in the vast melting pot of world culture. Postmodernism brings forth the other - such as minority groups and the Third World - who have long been belittled even as they have been appropriated, and so excites pluralism.

The demands of the postmodernists are not pointless. Real pluralism is carried out by a number of centers for the assimilation and dissemination of knowledge in the West. Publishers and universities receive works of literature from South America, Africa, The Caribbeans, Asia, and other former colonies. Museums reassess the principles motivating their collections in order to display the Third World art which was formerly looked down upon as being only "a variation of Western art." The pluralism practiced in the West can be looked at in two ways. First, the West is atoning for its arrogance and for the wrongs committed from colonial times. Second, pluralism has an economic impact because it is part of the variety of markets and resources.

If pluralism (read: postmodernism) has been hotly debated among Indonesia's intellectuals of late, it is clear that they have already received some "benefit," either direct or indirect, from the latest form of capitalism. At least this debate, in many areas, is a sign of the fear of becoming jaded, and of efforts towards totalization and excessive uniformity. Of course, pluralism by itself is not a fact, but is also not without any manifestation at all, in the arts in particular. Our latest art shows a movement away from the center. Over the past five years, I have seen brilliant creations, thoughts and actions coming from small laboratories and pockets supported by their own resources. The movement away from the center is just a first step, in rejecting the center's authority and domination by the nationalist modernists. The art world is the most direct and critical. By investigating shifts of the criteria in the international art world, it has reorganized the basis for judgment and its own history.

In the coming years, the development of Indonesian art will depend on these small pockets. It has been proven that overly large art centers (paid for and supported by the government) are actually wasteful and bureaucratic. Busy making sure of their own survival, they have no time to see new artistic trends. The small pockets - enlivened by a pluralistic vision - are spontaneous, cheap, fresh, flexible, and resolute. Those giving life to such places have usually been brought up amidst the tumult of domestic capitalism - meaning the old-fashioned capitalism that often gives in to the demands of the latest form of international capitalism. They are somewhat schizophrenic because they have witnessed the continual clash between culture and politics. While culture becomes increasingly complex and cosmopolitan, politics becomes more nationalistic and monolithic. But, this schizophrenia is actually productive because it makes them distrustful of totalization and centralization. It is completely appropriate that they bring small-scale discourses to life.

They will certainly not reject artistic centers because they know such centers are not only useful but also part of the history of art in Indonesia. What they reject is the opinion that artistic centers represent the centers of movements and criticism, and serve to baptize art and national culture. Postmodernism provides a theoretical base in the struggle for pluralism. As an intellectual commodity, postmodernism has spread out along with several other commodities, courtesy of the movement of international capitalism. But, it is also, at the same time, the most consistent reaction against capitalism. It is appropriate if it provides optimism and a critical power since it opens up so many possibilities and directions for progress. Had not modernism (and modernity) been usually understood as the primary direction for progress, and as accepting difference?

If pluralism begins to become a reality for the arts, those (who think of themselves as) pluralists cannot yet relax. They must know that many parts of life are still dominated by the concepts of centralization, totalization and linear progress. But, they can at least point out that parts of society are not just the targets of power, but rather those who actively use power. And, that this system was a mental construct first before it became a reality. Actual praxis in "unimportant" areas like art therefore suggests two possibilities: strip away this system's legitimacy, or think of it as completely insignificant. If pluralism is still very far from being realized in many parts of life, art can at least give a lesson to politics: that the suppressing of differences in the name of progress and order is a major mistake.

Each person is oppressed by the image of his or her nation, often without knowing it. This image is strengthened, for example, when I exchange views with a European, even more so if the person says, "Is it true that individual rights and human rights are not that important in your country?" To answer this question is not a form of self-justification or an exposition of nationalism, but an explanation of the nation in its (post-) colonial condition. Someone can be easily trapped into upholding cultural relativism if defensive and angry, saying that each culture has its own values. In any strange country, the burden of one's own culture as well as its manifestation - once again unrecognized - emerge as a type of secret shield or mask, providing a feeling of security. That burden roots a person to society and keeps that person from the grip or afflictions of others. It is a manifestation which allows that person to return home and have meaning.

Feeling bound to an environment! It is very simple. A friend of mine, the child of an Indonesian diplomat, who spent his childhood and teenage years in Europe, United States, and South America, once said to me that while he liked traveling to different parts of the world (partly because of his work as a photographer), he still preferred to live in Indonesia. There were many things he did not like in Indonesia, but he needed an environment and society where he did not need to explain his identity, "It's wonderful to be with people whose skin color and language are the same as mine." This feeling is even more true with those who grow up in Indonesia, meaning the generation educated in the national language. So I wonder again, how is it possible for us to bring about a consciously transcultural attitude, as I have often talked about in my writings? Does it not turn out that a person tends to be bound - without choosing to be - to a cultural environment? Don't we tend to depend on a cultural center, where actions and identities can be certified, validated and protected? Indonesia does not come to us as a scientific formula. We have been experiencing it since an early age, letting it grow within ourselves. When I was young, my family spoke Javanese at home. Outside the house, I was in an environment of the Using and Madurese languages! I also knew, from when I was small, that the habitat for these regional languages was limited. Faraway happenings did not come to us in the local language. Didn't we hear the radio news and read the newspaper in Indonesian? I have studied the national language since kindergarten. Lessons on geography (since grammar school), history (since junior high) and the raising of the flag ceremony every Monday continued to emphasize the concept of Indonesia. When I was a teenager, I began to love Indonesian literature. Slowly then, Indonesia became an imagining full of certainties, sheltering and protecting our local environment. I mention imagination because at the time there was no television at all in our small town, so there was no clamor of established visual images. Imagination brought Indonesia's expanse and distances close to our hearts (at the time, even traveling to Jember, only 105 km from our town of Banyuwangi, felt like a distant and exciting excursion). Indonesia is not something we request, but something that pushes itself forward. It is not something we create but grows quietly within ourselves. And, there is certainly no concept of a pre-Indonesia here (as has been stated by one of our philosophers, Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana), since the entirety of what Indonesia is stands in the present. In other words, for my generation (if the word "generation" can be used), Indonesia is no longer something to be fought for, but already a concrete part of life ("Indonesia is an important part of my village," says essayist Emha Ainun Nadjib), and able to provide a sense of security and certainty about the future. Every sought-after aspiration and role and all forms of progress

and modernity are made possible (and are also limited) by the state of being Indonesian, just as our teachers have said, "become people useful to your native land."

Now, I am reminded of when I joined up with a group of young people studying how to write poetry in Banyuwangi (when I was fourteen). They all put themselves into the framework (or cage) of Indonesian-language literature. Their idols, and spiritual teachers, were the greatest Indonesian poets, from Amir Hamzah to the poets of the 1970s. Even though their poems had a local flavor and appeared also in local newspapers (in Yogyakarta and Surabaya), their work continued to be based completely on some kind of centralized national literature.

Years later I saw that artistic nationalism of this sort infected other branches of "modern" art. It gave the artists a sense of security on the one hand but also provided some room for creative freedom on the other. The sense of security seemed to include the essence of Indonesian art - a soul blossoming from within - able to appropriate influences from anywhere and not change this essence, except in its outer coating, and ensured that Indonesia's treasury would be opened as widely and as deeply as possible in order to bring about creative freedom. In the case of art, nationalism cannot provide an identity - except for myths about identity - because identity always emerges from a struggle, as a direct result of the art's own particular value. The problem for us is simple - to escape from this kind of national criteria. Or to be more precise, to avoid judging from nationalist prejudices. That is why I like to proselytize, perhaps to excess, for comparative studies about transcultural behavior.

Nationalism today can be simply a problem of pragmatism, by recognizing that the nation-state is the most appropriate form for representing society. This state, it is hoped, can bridge or overcome many different interests and manage conflict between groups. In this sense, the state must be "objective." The nationstate, meaning the institutionalization of nationalism at a particular time, is obviously one of the most important facets of modernity. History tells us that the nation-state developed from the ground up, from society itself, growing "naturally" and almost flawlessly in the French and American Revolutions. In Western Europe in particular, the nation-state is one of the high points in the journey towards modernism. Meanwhile, on the other side of the globe, at a later time, the nation-state is part of the imported idea of modernity (and modernism) imposed on society. Or to be more extreme, the nation-state for (former) colonies is the point of departure, the foundation for establishing modernity.

Look at the countries of South America, for example. We recognize that their wars of revolution were truly impressive, freeing them from Spanish colonization. But, what really happened here? The criollo, the descendants of the white settlers, became the oligarchs and bourgeoisie and did not want to be held back by the colonizers. They wanted to stand as equals, both economically and culturally, with Europe. So, wars of independence erupted and were won, and they established nation-states along with parliamentary democracies? But, the oligarchy survived, and took root even more deeply. The national interest was only a mask for what the oligarchy wanted. Parliament became a referee between (more) conservative and (more) liberal groups. Would it not seem then that a state can never be objective?



I am now reminded of my teachers in grammar school and junior high who said that to become modern "was to sit as low as or to stand as high as the rest of the nations of the world." This is the simplest form of nationalism and was obviously the easiest to ponder in my childhood and teenage years, before advertising and television were as prevalent as they are today. When I was young, what was real were the people around me, who were brown-skinned and who spoke Indonesian, Javanese and Madurese. (Of course there were three small movie theaters in my town which showed films from America, India, and Hong Kong, but the foreigners in these living pictures were as strange as the angels and devils our religious teachers told us about.) For children today, every image and style coming in from the outside is equally real, or possibly even more real, than their immediate environment. Nevertheless, children in our big cities who like to roam the shopping malls and eat in McDonald's are still taught lessons about the heroism of Diponegoro and Soekarno fighting the colonizers. In the villages as well, with no exception, an amazing fascination has emerged for Mexican soap operas, and American aerobics. The relentless, terrifying onslaught of foreign things and images is spreading throughout every corner of the country. What is Indonesia to them, in their heads and hearts? How do they comprehend "doing service to the nation"? It is indeed amazing that the growth of interest in television far outstrips interest in the printed word. (In 1991 there were 400,000 satellite dishes in Indonesia. In the next year, this number jumped to 800,000.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, a print run for Indonesia's largest newspaper stands at 500,000 copies, as it has for the last ten years.) Imagining a nation and possessing it was much easier in the days when television was not so omnipresent.

## 5

Nowadays, it is no longer possible for us to live from, and in, one cultural environment. In this era of explosive growth in the media industry, many cultural environments approach and assault us. So, where is the nation and where is the national culture? So, the fundamentals of Indonesianization, or nationalism, are increasingly rocked by the image industry. But, those who are affected by global images do not necessarily or automatically become cosmopolitan on their own. What is most common, and most real, as I have stated in many of my writings, is a schizophrenia or division in the soul. A completely intact soul only exists in a pure and closed cultural environment. The problem is, do we want to admit our impurity, or pretend we live within the boundaries of a national culture? Many, even too many, people feel free living within a national culture because the nation no longer seems to be functioning as a regulator, but as a protector, particularly after the bloody conflict of 1965.<sup>5</sup> This sense of security has slowly been made into an institution and has become more important than tolerance. Security makes people care too much about their own interests and futures, and makes the interest of the group masquerade easily as the national interest. As a result, tolerance - which allows for equality and a critical perspective, as well as for the deficiencies (and rudeness) and excesses of every person - is increasingly pushed aside.

Making security an institution has prevented cosmopolitanism, particularly with the nation always enthusiastically developing (the myth) about Indonesia's original, pure and holy spirit. In this case, we can consider our own history. Dutch colonialism was not able, and did not want, to bring Europe directly to its colony. Significant cultural, intellectual or scientific achievements from Europe did not reach the Netherlands Indies. In fact, compared with India and Senegal (which were British and French colonies), the Netherlands Indies was very

much isolated from the latest developments in European modernism. What the Dutch did do, to the contrary, was to implant, expound upon and make an institution of a kind of tawdry romanticism, convincing students (including the elite group of nationalists) that this was Europe's high culture. This is why our nationalism has romantic characteristics.

The Dutch also very cleverly built a modern bureaucratic machine by making use of the indigenous feudal culture. Feudalism did not end in order to bring about modernity but, instead, became a significant unifying factor in forming a modern society. The many reasons for this were also married with another long-existing unifying force, namely the use of the Malay language over the centuries as a *lingua franca*. So, in the former Dutch colonial territory, independence meant unity, a unity overcoming all differences, which pitted itself against Europe and the West, as if The problem is, do we want to admit our impurity, or pretend we live within the boundaries of a national culture? Many, even too many, people feel free living within a national culture because the nation no longer seems to be functioning as a regulator, but as a protector, particularly after the bloody conflict of 1965.

This sense of security has slowly been made into an institution and has become more important than tolerance. Security makes people care too much about their own interests and futures, and makes the interest of the group masquerade easily as the national interest. As a result, tolerance - which allows for equality and a critical perspective, as well as for the deficiencies (and rudeness) and excesses of every person - is increasingly pushed aside. Making security an institution has prevented cosmopolitanism, particularly with the nation always enthusiastically developing (the myth) about Indonesia's original, pure and holy spirit. In this case, we can consider our own history. Dutch colonialism was not able, and did not want, to bring Europe directly to its colony. Significant cultural, intellectual or scientific achievements from Europe did not reach the Netherlands Indies. In fact, compared with India and Senegal (which were British and French colonies), the Netherlands Indies was very much isolated from the latest developments in European modernism. What the Dutch did do, to the contrary, was to implant, expound upon and make an institution of a kind of tawdry romanticism, convincing students (including the elite group of nationalists) that this was Europe's high culture. This is why our nationalism has romantic characteristics. The Dutch also very cleverly built a modern bureaucratic machine by making use of the indigenous feudal culture. Feudalism did not end in order to bring about modernity but, instead, became a significant unifying factor in forming a modern society. The many reasons for this were also married with another long-existing unifying force, namely the use of the Malay language over the centuries as a *lingua franca*. So, in the former Dutch colonial territory, independence meant unity, a unity overcoming all differences, which pitted itself against Europe and the West, as if modernity can grow from within a nation's soul, as if contact with the West was not an exchange but an expansion of this soul.

National culture is fundamentally a political matter. The people within a nation cannot be created without an identity. National culture is a problem of identity. During the nationalist era and in the early years of independence, the national culture was most easily defined as whatever was not Western, not whiteskinned, not colonial. One dictate here was even formalized within our constitution - that "national culture is the culmination of regional cultures." National culture was a problem of consciousness, consciousness raising or raised consciousness, to become what-is-not-Western, or not-just-formerly-colonial. In the meantime, many of the institutions learned about and adapted from Europe, such as education, political parties, Parliament, elections and the nation-state, immediately became

validated and were put into use in daily life while also being implanted in the subconscious - without being problematized whether they were Western or not. On the other hand, the suggestion to adopt the West completely, as proposed by Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana, seemed to become merely an abstract antithesis against overly nationalistic fortifications.' Takdir's proposal also, as time passed, began to become a complete tautology. If we have appropriated their clothing, their Parliament, their planes and their political parties, it is not because we want to be Western, becoming (like) the West. In even broader terms, every nation's journey towards modernity is a natural process, not a requirement. If modernity is thought of as a system of institutions and knowledge, it is clear that it came about or was created by Europe. Modernity, like religion, can spread anywhere, by any means, either peacefully or violently. We can say that modernity or modernism is a side effect of colonialism, and so distinguish between what modernity is and how it spreads. The means by which it spreads can be denounced, criticized or destroyed, but its meaning cannot, because it can encourage truth and well-being. But, what is modernity's meaning? It is a system of knowledge and of institutions existing as an extension of mankind's own metabolism, able to function universally. Heliocentrism, printing machines, the theory of gravity, political parties and Parliaments, for example, although found in Europe, can be useful - even important - to people all over the world. The white colonizers certainly did not teach the many meanings of modernity to be the truth, but as part of their own superiority (unconsciously), and to support their machines of production (consciously).

Where are the national characteristics within the meanings of modernity? There are none. As I have already said, these national characteristics are constructed to legitimize how modernity is activated. The struggle for independence was to demand the right to organize, possess and control one's own wealth. Independence was to become modern, "equal with other nations." However, this independence could not be aspired to without the idea of modernity, could it? And, the nation, the nation-state itself, had to be acknowledged as an imported idea. The nation, the historian Onghokham said to me one day, grew from the ground up in Western Europe, while in the former colonies it was imposed from above. And, on what basis was this territory established? Is the Republic of Indonesia created out of the lands where the Malay language has been a lingua franca for centuries? It is not, because if it were, Malaysia, northern Kalimantan, the southern Philippines and even more areas would be included. Legally and politically, Indonesia can only exist within the territory of the Netherlands Indies, as a former Dutch colony. National culture then is put forward for "a sharing of destinies," in order to legitimize this legal and political union.

I imagine cultural nationalism in its early stages as a tremendously powerful form of energy, of passion and solidarity, not just as speeches transfixing the masses but emerging also in concrete forms. It clearly motivated people like Soedjojono (painter), Soekarno (politician, political thinker, first President) and Pramoedya Ananta Toer (novelist) between the 1930s and 1940s. What I mean here is nationalism that serves as a source for creativity and with the creativity contributing to nationalism. Their works include the paradoxes and contradictions in creating the Indonesian nation, and the Indonesian people who at that time were not yet adjusted to become "complete human beings."

This is a nationalism that does not need to be interpreted by the established political authority alone. It is a nationalism that has a few chaotic and uncontrollable characteristics which are allowed to roam about seeking a shape. At this point, it becomes the point of

discovery for many groups. Of course, I do not want to overpraise this early stage of nationalism but want to recognize it and its historical context. Aren't we aware that in the past two decades, (interpretations of) this nationalism have been debated by many political groups, with the peak being the tragedy of 1965? And, wasn't what happened later a concentration of the opinions about the nation?

How very insufficient is Indonesia or "Indonesian culture" at fulfilling the many creative streams and new creative possibilities! My thoughts do not yet move from that point. We would indeed be very naive if we put a stop to the wealth and variety of creations or creative potential with what is called "national culture." In other countries, I am required to test not only stereotypes of cultures (of people, actually) that I meet, but also my own culture. We know that a stereotype exists because we, each person and group, can explain our presence when comparing ourselves with others. The question is, do we seek out our own essence or origins in this comparison? In answering yes, does it not mean that (a type of) orientalism is in the process of asserting itself within us, in our subconscious?

Searching for origins. Or strengthening the myth that Indonesia has a reality which has remained unchanged throughout history. This kind of epidemic infects not only the political elite but also the artists who crave innovation, as well as those from other layers who, startled in the face of a new wave, must seek prophets. See how much our bureaucrats love to talk about "noble values dug up from the earth itself," or about "the specific qualities of the nation." It is not uncommon for artists to validate their work as coming from "the original well" (in the 1950s) and from "the roots of tradition" (in the 1970s). The factory owners often say that strikes and demonstrations are not in line with the Indonesian work ethic. More examples could be added. But, it is enough to say that origins are only a mask, a myth, protecting the operation of a particular truth and authority.

[...]

## NOTES

1. The "complete human being" is a "philosophy" recorded in the Broad State Guidelines of the Republic of Indonesia. This concept appeared during the New Order era (1966 to the present). Every Indonesian must become complete human being, meaning human being integrated into their society, their native land and their state. He or she does not highlight individual priorities. He or she has many "dignified" qualities, as in emphasizing discipline as well as sacrifice for the state, for humanity and for God, and so has an integrity and morality. This philosophy has a character of the "East" or "Asia" or "indigenous" as opposed to the "West" which is individualistic, overly specialized, secular and greedy.
2. Our country which consists of 13,000 islands has more than 300 regional languages and dialects. Many regional languages are still the mother tongue of many people. However, all schools use the national language as do the television broadcasts which

- reach throughout the archipelago. Although many regional languages have a strong oral tradition (in performance, for example), the written forms (literature and newspapers and magazines in regional languages, for example) are now fewer and fewer. There have been efforts to save regional culture, often with a bureaucratic tinge, such as those which since the beginning of the 1980s have been called Javanology, Baliology, Sundanology, etc. ~'~.
3. This is a general picture because, even though each Latin American country has its own history of independence, they are all tied together by the outline of Iberian colonialism on this continent. Read, for example, Edwin Williamson. 1992. *The Penguin History of Latin America*, pp. 194-284. London: Penguin.
  4. Read Mayong Laksono. 1994. "Televisi Pan-Asia dan Kita" (Pan Asian Television and Us). *Kompas* daily newspaper, 24 August.
  5. What I mean is the period when Sukarno's regime fell, starting on 30 September 1965 until he was replaced by General Suharto on 11 March 1966. This period was a kind of civil war, in which the Indonesia Communist Party was confronted by many anti communist groups as well as the army. At least 500,000 people were killed during this period. The Indonesian Communist Party was completely destroyed and remains banned to this day.
  6. Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana (1908-1994) was one of Indonesia's most important modernist thinkers. During a long debate over the identity and reality of Indonesia, which took place from 1935 to 1939, Takdir stated that Indonesia was completely separated from pre-Indonesia. (It should be remembered that Indonesia became independent on 17- August 1945). Pre-Indonesia, in Takdir's opinion, was an age of ignorance, an age of local-feudal kingdoms which ended in the close of 19th century after being defeated by the white colonizers. Indonesia, on the other hand, is a new entity, a new consciousness, meaning also individualism, rationalism, and materialism. Let us orient ourselves to the West, said Takdir, a message he pursued until his death.

*Translated from the Indonesian by Sarah Maxim Nuranto and the author*

Appeared in David Wu et.al. (eds.), *Emerging Pluralism in Asia and the Pacific* (Hongkong: Institute of Asia Pacific Studies, 1999).

\*\*\*\*\*

